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ABSTRACT

Services to students with disabilities at the Open University (OU) in Great Britain are described. This large distance teaching institution offers courses in multi-media form, using printed texts, audio and video material, radio and television programs, microcomputer software, and tutorial support (available either from local study centers or at 13 regional centers). Access for students with disabilities is facilitated through such services as preparatory courses to develop study skills for students with visual and hearing impairments, taped materials, identification of special needs in computer use, arrangements for home examinations, and assessment of individual functional requirements. These services are supported by an information and resource network with specialist organizations and through links to national and regional governmental and government-funded agencies. Experiences of two students with severe physical disabilities are described. Suggestions for the future include: a pilot project to encourage other higher education institutions to facilitate access to the OU system; early planning and preparation of students; equipping students to use new assistive technology; and providing opportunities for students to review their situation and choose other options if desired. (BRM)

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Foreword

The Working Together? *series explores key issues relating to the transition to adulthood of young people with disabilities. Each study examines these issues within a different context.*

In this paper, **Derek Child** *(Adviser on the Education of Students with Disabilities, Open University) describes the work of the Open University with students with disabilities and recounts the experiences of two learners. He emphasises the need for a higher level of* inter-agency collaboration *than presently exists to enable the OU to offer* flexible, supported learning opportunities *to a greater number of students with disabilities. The important role of* new technology *in supporting independent study and the value of* early assessment *of a learner's support needs are highlighted. The paper illustrates an issue that was central to each of the* Working Together? *studies: the need for* real choices *for people with disabilities to exist in the* real world. *Empowerment is an empty concept unless there is a range of real roles and real activities to be tried out by learners. Despite the valuable work of the OU, the experiences of Sarah and James reflect the limited range of options open to severely disabled young people who wish to enter higher education and the lack of choice or coherence in their transition to adulthood.*

Pat Hood,
Development Officer,
FEU

Access to Higher Education

Students with disabilities at the Open University

The Open University

The Open University is a large distance teaching institution with over 130,000 students currently registered on its courses with the undergraduate, associate and continuing education programmes. Courses are presented in a multi-media form using printed course texts, set books, audio and video

Working Together?

A series of studies undertaken for the UK contribution to the OECD/ CERI Disabled Action Programme

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material, radio and television programmes and, in some cases, microcomputer software. The University's headquarters is at Milton Keynes and there are 13 regional centres located around the United Kingdom from which students' tuition and counselling is organised. Students taking courses in the undergraduate and associate student programmes are offered tutorial support and counselling at either their local study centre or from their regional centre. Some courses include a one-week summer school which provides students with a range of experiences to enable them to develop their understanding at a practical and theoretical level. All foundation courses in the undergraduate programme include a summer school component and on these and high-level courses, students gain direct experience of laboratory, field or project work.

The University operates an open access policy and accepts adult learners with a wide range of different backgrounds and experience. Those entering the undergraduate programme are required to take a foundation course on entry to the University. In the design of these courses, recognition is given to the need for students to develop their learning skills.

Foundation courses include a high level of tutor-counsellor support and students are encouraged to attend their study centre tutorials on a regular basis in order to minimise the isolation that can be experienced as a distance education student.

At post-foundation level, students are offered less tutorial support and are encouraged to develop their independent learning skills, although general counselling and advice is available to them throughout their university career.

Services to students with disabilities

Since its foundation in 1970 the Open University has developed a range of services to provide a high level of access for people with disabilities. From the outset the University has encouraged people with disabilities to enrol for courses in the undergraduate and associate programmes and every effort has been made to maintain the 'openness' of the University throughout. The development of policies and practice has been encouraged by the University's decision to recognise its responsibility by incorporating provision of this kind in its charter. Students are integrated members of the University and the level of 'special provision' is limited to preparatory courses for the visually disabled and students with hearing impairment, who need to develop specific study skills if they are to survive in a distance education system. Support services are also provided to assist students who have a range of sensory and physical disabilities, and include the provision of learning material on tape, interpreter support, a range of services to provide access to summer schools, and assessment in identification of special needs for students using microcomputer equipment, together with special arrangements which enable students with disabilities to take examinations in their own homes.

The development of services for students with disabilities is the responsibility of the Adviser on the Education of Students with Disabilities and the Office for Students with Disabilities, both based at the University's headquarters at Milton Keynes. Each of the 13 regional centres has a member of the counselling staff who is responsible for identification of students within their region and for the assessment of their individual requirements. *This assessment is functional and minimal attention is paid to medical aspects of disabilities.* By adopting this positive approach to disability, the University has attempted to ensure that any student with a disability who wishes to study can be given the opportunity, even where they may be severely restricted by the nature and extent of their disability. Consequently, students with a wide range of disabilities have benefited from the opportunity to study for a degree through the Open University system. For some, it has been their only chance to experience higher education because of practical, physical or attitudinal barriers. For others, it has provided the same opportunity as an adult learner as it has for their able-bodied peers — the opportunity to take advantage of higher education without the disruption of moving away from the home environment, employment or other commitments. Some students have taken advantage of the option to transfer to full-time higher

education after they have completed their two foundation courses. Where young people with disabilities apply to the University, they are always made aware of the option to transfer and/or of the possibility of gaining entry to full-time courses via special access schemes.

Development of services and inter-agency co-operation

The maintenance, monitoring and development of services for students with disabilities at the Open University is a constant process. Changes in the profiles of courses, student aspirations and the advent of new technology are all factors which have resulted in a close working partnership with a range of national statutory and voluntary organisations. No single institution possesses the expertise or resources to meet every case of individual student need and a close co-operation with specialist organisations like the Royal National Institute for the Blind, The Royal National Institute for the Deaf, The Spastics Society, Arthritis Care, The National Federation of Access Centres, The Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation, and SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, form an essential component of the information and resource network which supports the University's service to students with disabilities. In addition, links to government and government-funded agencies, such as the Department of Education and Science, The Department of Trade and Industry, The National Council for Educational Technology, the Further Education Unit and the Training Agency, provide a further example of the *complex inter-agency network* which surrounds special needs provision and which has enabled the OU to undertake research and development and to develop policy and practice with other institutions working in the special needs field. Apart from these examples of inter-agency co-operation, specialist staff working in regional centres have developed local networks with local education authorities, local authorities' social services departments, local or regional voluntary organisations working for people with disabilities and centres for long-term residential care, including long-stay hospitals.

The University accepts that it has a responsibility to ensure that an *appropriate level of support* is provided to meet individual student needs. It is also recognised that idealism has to be tempered by realism and that scarce resources must be distributed in such a way as to provide the best general service for this particular group of students. The direct support of government, industry and commerce, and especially national voluntary organisations, has provided an essential element to stimulate those institutional developments and provide individual support for students.

Development of inter-agency co-operation: the student in a supported education environment

Open University students taking courses in the undergraduate and associate student programmes are traditionally home based and their learning support is provided directly by the University. Apart from one attempt to establish a special support team for a deaf and blind student attending a residential college, the idea of giving students the chance to commence their OU studies while still in full-time education has not been a general pattern for provision. The two cases described are both examples of the OU attempting multi-agency co-operation in order to provide a *flexible response* to very specific needs.

The nature and extent of the disabilities experienced by the young people concerned, initially appeared to preclude any possibility of their following a full-time course of higher education. It was also felt important to provide them with the opportunity to gain confidence in accessing a distance learning system and at the same time to have their special needs recognised in the context of being a student with a disability in such a system. Younger students who are used to having their learning structured for them can find it difficult to reorientate to a more remote relationship with an organisation which is necessarily dependent upon the printed word for both the delivery of its learning materials and general guidance about study. Students with disabilities need to learn from an early stage that they are likely to be most effective and gain maximum benefit *if they become their own advocates*. They also need to learn to organise their

own study programme and to make suitable arrangements to monitor the television and radio output.

The experience of two severely physically disabled students

Sarah

Sarah has been disabled since birth through a condition known as brittle bones disease. She is currently living at home with her parents and studying for an Open University degree. She is 25 and hopes that she might eventually manage to gain employment working in a specialist college for the disabled. She requires a high level of care because of the extent of her disability and her parents currently provide this support. Apart from the time she spends on her OU studies and related tutorials, she also helps out one day a week with the local disability advice and information line.

Sarah's education was entirely home based for the first 13 years of her life. She and her parents said that several different home tutors called each week. Local special schools seemed unwilling to admit Sarah because of the severity of her disability and she naturally missed the stimulus of being with people of her own age. The home tuition appeared to be unco-ordinated and she was very glad to have had the chance to spend the last three years of her schooling in a small special school for the physically disabled who may also have learning difficulties.

> 'As you can imagine the school only taught basic subjects and I was considered to be one of the brighter pupils — the academic standard left a lot to be desired', said Sarah.

Her father added that some subjects, like French, which Sarah started under home tuition, could not be continued at the school. Despite this, she left school with four CSEs.

At 16, Sarah was offered a place at a specialist residential further education college where she remained for five years. During her time as a student at the college, she took a foundation course in Community Care, four 'O' levels in English, English Literature, Maths and Accountancy, and 'A' level History. She attempted to enter full-time higher education and applied to all the universities, polytechnics and colleges of higher education within a 100-mile radius of her home. In addition, she visited those that offer special facilities for students with disabilities, but in all cases she was turned down.

> 'I do not know if I could have coped with mainstream higher education but I was not given the chance to find out because of the access problems and my need for 24-hour care. I felt both offended, annoyed and disillusioned by the whole process of applying for a mainstream course. The universities and polytechnics were very quick to dismiss me. They just do not want to know, if you are severely physically handicapped'.

Sarah said that her experience was not unique; there were a number of students at college at that time with a similar level of disability who were being turned away from mainstream higher education. When it was first suggested to Sarah that she might consider the Open University, she felt reluctant.

> 'I had always wanted to go into mainstream higher education, if only for the social contact with other students and lecturers, and also to feel that I was an integrated member of the mainstream of society. Somehow going into the Open University reminded me of going back into home tuition, of study at home and staying at home.'

Since joining the University in 1985 Sarah has steadily worked through her courses at the rate of one credit per year. She has taken foundation courses in Arts and Social Science; second-level courses in Popular Culture, Information Technology: Social and Technological issues; and a third-level Arts course on the 19th century novel. She has managed to attend, and greatly enjoy, the summer schools associated with three of these courses, at which physical care was provided for her by experienced volunteer helpers. She enjoyed the contact with other students and staff so much that she has offered to act as a volunteer worker at summer school for the Students Association.

The second-level course in Information Technology requires the use of a microcomputer. In preparation for this she underwent an assessment last year through a special project. She finds a conventional keyboard tiring to use and accesses her microcomputer via a microwriter. Students with disabilities have been keen to participate in this new area of teaching for the University and they can, for example, participate on an equal basis when using COSY.

In 1986 Sarah went to her local Skill Centre for an employment assessment. Although it was decided that she could make use of a computer, either entering or referencing data, and could also use the telephone, no direct offers of employment have resulted.

> 'The assessment was quite successful but they left the decision about work to me', said Sarah. 'I want to concentrate my energy on my studies with OU because I want to carry on with Honours and, hopefully, teacher training. Teaching at a specialist college for the disabled may be a realistic option because the overall environment is likely to be adapted to my needs in terms of access and care'.

James

James is now 21. He is severely restricted by his disability which results from Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. James currently attends a specialist further education centre. He joined the OU in 1987, commencing his studies with the foundation course in Mathematics which he passed with distinction. In 1988 he took a second-level course, 'Introduction to Pure Mathematics'. Because of deteriorating health, James has decided to take a rest from the rigors of OU study in 1989 but continues to attend the Further Education Centre where he is taking two distance-education courses offered by the National Extension College in GCSE Economics and Editing. He is also receiving training in independence skills, office skills and word processing. He hopes to return to OU study in 1990.

During the course of two years as an OU student, James felt he had a good level of support from his tutor/counsellor in the first year and from his tutor in the second year. His tutorials were held at school and in the Further Education Centre where the staff were used to their students receiving tuition from external teachers. James's inability to attend study centre tutorials and summer school must inevitably have restricted his experience of learning alongside other students and denied him access to certain aspects of the curriculum, but feelings of isolation were obviously lessened by his continued attendance at the FE Centre, which provided a good supportive environment from which to work. His academic performance was strong in his chosen field although, in his second year, his overall performance was affected by deteriorating health.

It should be said that James was fortunate to live in an area served by a local education authority which is accustomed to making flexible provision for a range of disadvantated groups, including people with disabilities. His head teacher said that she had to gain special permission for him to remain at school after his 19th birthday in order to complete the first year of his OU course. For some time the head teacher had recognised the continuing problem of transition for James and his contemporaries at post-19 as the local education authority further education colleges within the school's catchment area were unable to accommodate young people with severe disabilities. She said that her first attempt to set up a further eduation centre as a joint exercise between the LEA, Health and Social Services failed, in her opinion, *because no consensus could be reached between each of the agencies regarding its role.* The centre was eventually established under the aegis of the further education service and now provides a base for 12 young people with severe disabilities who are drawn from the adjacent special school and a young disabled unit at the local general hospital. The centre also acts as a resource for those students who are able to attend mainstream courses on a full- or part-time basis and offers a range of *flexible learning opportunities* for those students who are restricted by their disabilities from access to mainstream provision.

Lessons from these experiences

From these two case-studies a number of implications emerge, both at institutional level and in terms of individual options and support.

Further agency collaboration

- Transition at the inter-agency level appeared to work well although greater coherence towards this group of students is needed in future provision.
- In both cases the inter-agency relationship was primarily between the University and two other education institutions.
- In both cases the arrangements for the students were made well in advance and the staff responsible for these students appeared to have a clear understanding of the opportunity which might be offered to them by a distance teaching organisation which made special provision for students with disabilities.
- These staff were also skilled at recognising the needs of their students, who, it must be emphasised, were consulted at all stages of consideration of the OU as an option to meet their need for higher education.
- Recognition of the potential difficulty of making the transition to becoming a distance education student was acknowledged and the supported educational environment undoubtedly helped the two students to gain sufficient confidence to work successfully with this style of learning.

Choice, coherence, meeting of expectations

At an individual level the issues of choice, coherence and meeting of expectations were less satisfactorily addressed. Throughout the interview with Sarah and her parents it was obvious that very little support had been offered by her specialist careers officer. She was very keen to enter full-time higher education, and yet the failure of university and polytechnic institutions to realise her potential provides further evidence of their inherent caution and lack of commitment to the admission of severely physically disabled students. Although she is now making steady progress towards her degree, Sarah has *clear expectations about her future employment which she hopes will enable her to live independently*. Sarah would say that she ultimately had *no choice* to make about her higher education and that, while she had progressed through the opportunity offered by the OU, it could never meet her expectation to be a fully integrated student on a full-time course. From the account of her experience of transition, it is clear that she was aware that the OU option would seem like a return to home tuition which she knew meant isolation and a loss of independence.

Flexible learning opportunities

In the case of James, points of transition are less obvious but, nevertheless, important. His decision to opt for OU was made in order to provide him with a more appropriate curriculum than traditional 'A' level study. For a number of reasons, including his health, James did not wish to enter full-time higher education. It was also felt that the flexibility of the OU system would suit him because it was recognised that he might need to opt out from time to time if his health deteriorated, or that he might be able to adjust his rate of learning by opting for a half-credit rather than a full-credit course.

Development of future provision at the OU

From the outset the University has endeavoured to provide a wide range of services for students with disabilities.

Nevertheless, *the OU has more students with disabilities than all other HE establishments in the UK put together*. To that extent, it has succeeded in opening up opportunities for many people. Where young students are concerned, every effort has been made to encourage them to seek opportunities on programmes in full-time further or higher education.

As the two experiences described here illustrate, there are some young people for whom distance education systems, assisted by multi-agency support, is their only option, either because they do not possess the necessary prerequisite entry qualifications or because they are unable to find a university or polytechnic which can make suitable arrangements to meet their special educational and personal needs. If these two people are typical of others — and there is evidence they are not alone in having very complex needs — then the OU must consider developing its services further.

In suggesting the expansion of provision for this group of students, it is assumed that their teachers and advisers will have explored other options with them and that entry to the OU does not preclude the possibility of transfer to a full-time course of higher education. The option to transfer should be automatically reviewed at the post-foundation course stage as a matter of principle.

The need for further recognition of the OU's important role in this work

The proposal to extend provision for young people with severe disabilities must inevitably raise questions about the need for additional resources to provide adequate levels of support since the University is financially constrained in the amount of its annual grant it can devote to this area of its work. If recognition can be given, either by central or local government, to this small yet greatly disadvantaged group, *a pilot scheme could be established to encourage further education units in schools, further education colleges and specialist residential colleges to offer a supported educational environment to facilitate access to the OU system.*

The issues raised by these experiences

- The need for development and continual evaluation of provision.
- The need for early planning and preparation of students.
- The importance of assessment so that students are equipped to work independently and trained to use new technology which will support independent access to the curriculum.
- The need for a co-ordinator to ensure that the level of liaison between the university, the tertiary college and the student is structured and able to guarantee a proper level of monitoring and evaluation.
- A recognition of the need to provide opportunities for young people to review their situation and to take up other options if that is their choice. This is a part of the transition process for all young people.

The OU has achieved a great deal and recognises the need constantly to review and develop, in order to ensure it can be an agent of transition, through multi-agency collaboration.

The feasibility study, activities and central issues of *Working Together?*, the UK Contribution to the OECD/CERI Disabled Action Programme, are summarised in a series of three bulletins available from FEU. The three major studies undertaken for the UK contribution are described in *New Technology, Disability and Special Educational Needs; Enabled to Work;* and *Self-Advocacy and Parents*, also available from FEU.

FEU welcomes enquiries about *Working Together?* or other aspects of its special needs work. They should be addressed to Pat Hood, 2 Orange Street, London WC2H 7WE. Tel. 01-321 0433 ext.261

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